

Walk Like a Phoenician: Belly Dancing in Ancient Sources

A Class given by Lady Melanie de la Tour,

Belly dancing: Latin Sources

Gaditean Dancers

Juvenal, Satires, XI.162 -4

Forsitans expectes ut Gaditana canoro
incipiant prurire choro plausuque probatae
ad terram tremulo descendant clune puellae.

You may look perhaps for a troop of Spanish maidens
to win applause by immodest dance and song,
sinking down with quivering buttocks to the floor.

Martial, 1.41.12

Quod de Gadibus improbus magister

Like the lewd dance-master from Gades

_____, V 78. 26-28

Nec de Gadibus improbis puellae
vibabunt sine fine prurientes
lascivos docili tremore lumbos

Nor will girls from wanton Gades
with endless prurience swing lascivious loins
with practiced writtings

_____, 11.16.4

Iam mea Lampsacio lascivit pagina versu
et Tartesiaca concrepat aera manu

No my page wantons in the verse of Lampsacus
and beats the timbrel with the hand of a figurante of Tartessus.
(a Spanish dancing girl)

Martial, XIV 203

Puella Gaditana, or Girl from Gades

Tam tremulum crisat, tam blandum prurit, ut ipsum
maturbatorem fecerit Hippolytum.

Her waggles are so tremulous, her itch so seductive that she
would make a masturbator out of Hippolytus himself.

Ovid, Amor, II.4.29.

Illa placet gestu numerosaque bracchia ducit
et tenerum molli torquet ab arte latus

Another takes me by her movement, swaying her arms in rhythm
and curving her side with supple art.

Ovid, The Art of Love, III.349-352

Quis dubitet, quin scire uelim saltare puellam,
Ut moveat posito brachia iussa mero?
Artifices lateris, scenae spectacula, amantur:
Tantum movilitas illa decoris habet.

Who would doubt that I would have a woman know how to dance,
that when the wine is set she may, when bidden, move her arms.
Artists whom the stage displays win favour as they move their sides;
so great a charm has this easy movement.

The Middle-Eastern Connection

Gaditanae were not all from Spain. The term seems to have expanded to cover all Middle-Eastern style dancing. Literary sources freely mix references to Gades with those to Syria and Egypt. Crotalistria (castanet players) are also frequently connected to the Galli, or eunuch-priests of Cybele.

Martial, 3.63.3-6

Bellus homo est, flexos qui digerit ordine crines,
balsama qui semper, cinnama semper olet;
cantica qui Nili, qui Gaditana susurrat,
qui movet in varios bracchia volsa modos

A pretty fellow is one who arranges neatly his curled locks,
who continually smells of balsam, continually of cinnamon;
who hums catches from the Nile and Gades
who waves his depilated arms in time to varied measures.

____XIV 203

Puella Gaditana, or Girl from Gades (see above.

#204 refers to the cymbals of one of the Galli, and the Great Mother.

Appendix Vergiliana

Copa Surisca, or Dancing Girl of Syria

Copa Surisca caput Graeca redimita mitella,
crispum sub crotala docta movere latus,
ebria fumosa saltat lasciva taberna
ad cubitum raucos excutiens calamos.

Dancing girl of Syria, her hair caught up with a fillet:
Very subtle in swaying those quivering flanks of hers
In time to the castanet's rattle: half-drunk in the smoky tavern,
She dances, lascivious, wanton, clashing the rhythm.

Infama, or the Social Status of Dancing

Considered not in the best taste for proper Romans, probably because of its links to slaves and foreigners, and its strong sexual connotations. In the later Empire, senators and their children (and grandchildren) were forbidden to marry actresses and dancers. The law had to be repealed before Justinian could marry Theodora.

Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 13.

Saltatorem appellat L. Murenam Cato. Maledictum est....Nemo enim fere saltat sobrius, nisi forte insanit, neque in solitudine neque in convivio moderato atque honest. Temstivi convivi, amoeni loci, multarum deliciarum comes est extrema saltatio.

Cato calls Murena a dancer. A slanderous abuse....Hardly anyone dances except in his cups, either by himself or at any respectable party, unless of course he is out of his mind. Dancing comes at the end of a seasonal meal, in attractive surroundings and after a wealth of sensuous enjoyment.

Sallust, *The War with Catiline*, XXV. 2-3. Description of Sempronia, a noble Roman lady of ill-repute.

Litteras Graecis et Latinis docta, psallere et saltare elegantius, quum necesse est probae, multa alia, quae instrumenta luxuriae sunt.

Well read in the literature of Greece and Rome, able to play the lyre and dance more skillfully than an honest woman need, and having many other accomplishments which minister to voluptuousness.

Suetonius, Nero, 27.

(dancers little better than prostitutes, taking part in obscene theatrical spectacles)

Cenitabaque nonnumquam et in publico, naumachia praeclusa vel Martio campo vel Circo Maximo, inter scortorum totius urbis et ambubaiarum ministeria.

Sometimes too he closed the inlets and banqueted in public in the great tank (made for sea-fights) in the Campus Martius, or in the Circus Maximus, waited on by harlots and dancing girls from all over the city.

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